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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experience of a German teacher of English as a second language (ESL) in using recreational reading as an integral part of ESL instruction and gives suggestions for materials and techniques to use in the classroom. The discussion begins with a description of foreign language instruction in the German school system and explains how reading for pleasure supports language learning within and beyond school. The reasons for introducing readers are compared with the common arguments against them, and approaches to the use of readers for mixed-ability groups are described. Appropriate commercially-produced materials are reviewed, and their common characteristics are noted. Classroom experiments in the use of readers are summarized. The paper concludes with ideas for assessing and guiding students' receptive reading and for integrating the reading program into the foreign language course. (MSE)

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Reading for Pleasure in English Language Classes

I would like to start by clarifying what I understand by "reading for pleasure": It means that students read on their own because they are interested and motivated to do so, that they learn from early on in their foreign language course that they can read independently of the teacher. This gives them self-confidence, which in turn, encourages them to ask for more books to read.

The reading material I refer to comprises the following:

- texts which have been specially written for foreign language learners and accordingly are carefully graded in vocabulary and structure,

- texts which have been adapted from English/American original literature (children's books as well as what is termed world literature), to suit the linguistic attainment level of the language learner,

- English/American originals which have been shortened, but not otherwise been tampered with,

- English/American original texts.

1. English in German schools

In order to explain the background of my experience with English readers I think it is necessary to dwell briefly on some characteristics of foreign language courses in German schools: With the beginning of the fifth year of school life (i.e. at the age of ten or eleven) German students start learning a foreign language, usually English, in some regions French and in a number of schools Latin, yet English is by far the most frequent first foreign language. In their first and second years English is normally taught for five or six periods per week, but this often drops sharply to just three weekly periods in the third year. This can be especially detrimental to students in the Hauptschule, which is the equivalent of the old form of English Secondary Modern School. Students in this type of school are ordinarily slower than students in the Realschule or the Gymnasium and accordingly experience failure more frequently with the ensuing lack of motivation. It is especially with these students in mind but certainly not exclusively for them that I started thinking a couple of years ago about the possibilities of reading for pleasure.

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To my mind it is necessary in all types of schools to help students to understand that learning a foreign language need not be restricted to a few periods per week. In order to do this they should be familiarized early on with simple readers which they read on a voluntary basis. This can serve a number of purposes:

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The students learn to apply their knowledge of English to texts apart from their coursebooks. They find out that extensive reading is a fluency activity, which aims at global understanding, and moreover it can prepare them for a gradual training of certain reading techniques, which, from their third year of learning onwards, they should be able to apply more or less independently.

Thus the receptive skill of reading comprehension leads to a comparatively early independence. And the teaching of reading comprehension seems - according to numerous experiments - to lead to greater success than the exclusive training of the productive skills of speaking and writing. But apart from the argument of quick success there is another good reason to teach reading comprehension: it is a technique which is of utmost value for the students after finishing school because it enables them to apply and increase their foreign language abilities.

Moreover one has to bear in mind that it is the weaker students and the slow learners who often have to work in very heterogeneous learning groups and who are liable to experience failure so early in the language learning process that they jump to the conclusion that they are unable to learn a foreign language at all. And it is for these students that the receptive skill of reading comprehension may prove to be a fruitful, maybe even the only fruitful approach to the foreign language. That is why it has to be encouraged and supported.

2. Reasons for Introducing Readers

Quite a few arguments may be put forward against the reading of readers altogether:

1) English coursebooks (at least in Germany) are sometimes so comprehensive that they can hardly be managed within the prescribed time, i.e. one school year, and that is why there is no time left for readers. Counter argument: Readers don't need to take up class time.

2) The contents of the coursebooks, i.e. the texts, exercises, vocabulary and selection of structures chart the course of progress in the foreign language, and this progress is measurable, which a survey of the lists of new words and structures can easily demonstrate. With readers there might not necessarily be the same secure feeling of their linguistic progression. Counter argument: Many readers also follow a structural and lexical progression.

3) German coursebooks are accompanied by extensive teachers' manuals which offer a wide variety of ideas and methodological suggestions for working with the individual steps and units. And these aids are not normally present with readers. Counter argument: There exist in fact methodological helps as to how readers can be used in language teaching. E.g. Tricia Hedge, Using Readers in Language Teaching, London: Macmillan, 1985 (Essential

Language Teaching Series); **The Longman Guide to Graded Reading**, London: Longman, 1987.

4) Parents more often than not are interested in what their children are learning, if only to control the memorizing of new words, and some seem to be distrustful of the "seriousness" of readers altogether. Counter argument: Parents may be shown the benefits of extensive reading.

5) Language tests of all sorts help evaluate the students' progress and this cannot so easily be done with readers, since voluntary reading seems to be incompatible with formal testing in the way new structures and words of a unit can be tested. Counter argument: there are highly motivating fun exercises for testing reading comprehension.

All these arguments should certainly not be dismissed too lightly, though on further consideration, none is wholly convincing. And in any case, the arguments in favour of readers seem to me to be far more cogent:

1) The progression of the coursebooks makes students continually aware of what they do not know but not of what they actually do know or can do with the language. In other words: when working with the coursebook the students can hardly ever apply the foreign language independently, but depend on the teacher's guidance. With the help of readers the students experience independence in foreign language learning. They find out that they can work on their own.

2) With growing experience in independent reading the coursebook loses its importance as the only source of foreign language material and the only source of progression.

3) Each unit in an ordinary coursebook contains a number of new words and one or several new structures, which results in a certain density and requires intensive work with texts and exercises. This, in turn, prevents students from learning to approach texts as a whole.

4) Texts in coursebooks are often read aloud in class, although reading aloud hardly ever occurs in everyday life. At least it enjoys such high popularity with German foreign language teachers that it is relatively late that German students start to approach an English text through a period of individual silent reading. Yet this is how readers and reading generally are normally - and best - approached.

5) Last but not least readers will be welcomed as an enjoyable change from coursebook work and an alternative from well-known methods of language learning.

In view of the fact that the number of weekly school periods drops sharply after the elementary stage it is absolutely necessary for a reading programme to start within the first two years

when there is still enough time to initiate students to reading for pleasure. And this can only be done separately from the use of well-established coursebooks, since students can develop their reading skills only on material that is new to them. This should be motivating enough to attract weaker students, too, and gradually train them in the skill of silent reading.

Psychologists tell us that recognizing words is much easier than recalling and actively producing them. Information that for a lengthy period of time has not been used becomes inactive and is stored in the long-term memory where it is not lost since it can be recognized. But it cannot be actively produced on demand. This is another reason that makes the continuous process of reading plausible: It can advance the students' ability to memorize words and structures and recognize them.

Taking these psychological considerations into account it seems especially important for weaker and slow learners to realize their personal chances in the English language class. These learners can be briefly characterized as follows:

- Very often they are good at understanding the foreign language. At least they understand much more than we give them credit for.

- They badly need success. They have often experienced early failure and they need proof that they are good at something.

- This proof that within a limited range they can be efficient and successful results in a positive attitude towards the foreign language and, in the medium term, with luck in increasing self-confidence which, in an upward spiral movement, can again lead to a positive attitude.

It is at this point that reading for pleasure steps in. The independent reading of texts can contribute towards a positive view of language learning and it can prevent students from early discouragement which inevitably leads to a decrease in motivation.

Yet there is another argument: no matter whether readers are read as a shared activity in the English class or as an individual extracurricular activity at home they admirably serve as a means to teach mixed-ability groups. This can relate to the speed of teaching, the difficulty of books selected, and the methods of working with the books or doing follow-up exercises.

Let me briefly sketch the possibilities: Readers can be introduced in heterogeneous groups to help fast learners to work on their own (reading away silently) while the slower students are still working on some written task or exercise or are being given special instruction by the teacher to help them cope with some problem. In this way fast students can be individually encouraged and motivated. On the other hand, slow learners can be supported if they are given enjoyable but very easy reading material for individual reading without the threat of formal testing.

However, there is a risk to reading silently which must not be overlooked: When reading in a foreign language students normally subvocalize, i.e. they move tongue and lips. Thus they may form hypotheses about the pronunciation of certain unknown words and mispronounce them and not have the chance to be corrected. And these false hypotheses may later lead to certain complications when speaking. Yet there are some methods to minimize this risk:

- At the beginning students are given material that is so easy as to contain hardly any new words at all.

- Students are given audio cassettes to accompany the text. In this way they proceed along two paths: they read the text and at the same time (or in two stages) listen to it on cassette to familiarize themselves with the pronunciation of certain unknown lexis.

- While reading, students note down a few unknown words, the pronunciation of which is of interest to them, and later ask the teacher for help.

- Students learn to recognize the most important pronunciation symbols and work independently with a dictionary. (This, of course, only applies to higher ability groups.)

Yet on the whole the risk of mispronouncing a few words should be no fundamental obstacle to the introduction of foreign language readers.

3. Reading Material - an Overview

The sheer quantity of the material available makes it difficult for the teacher to survey the whole market. All the well-known British publishers offer a vast variety of readers suitable for all age groups, language levels and tastes. That is why I have tried to restrict my survey to series of readers which are particularly suited for beginners, i.e. the first two or say three years of English. I have only selected readers and series which I have personally tried out in various classes and school types.

The first readers can be introduced without much difficulty at the beginning of the second half of the first learning year. I have successfully done just that at the German Hauptschul-level, i.e. with weaker and slower students. However, it is of utmost importance to start with the easiest readers available, with little text and large illustrations. These requirements are fulfilled, for example, by the series **Activity Books - Let's Start Reading** by Oxford University Press. The series consists of five titles. The simple plot is presented in the present continuous tense only. Possibly unknown words are explained in a kind of picture dictionary. At the back of each title there are vocabulary exercises.

Similar characteristics hold good for the series **Start with English - Readers**, also by OUP. It consists of six stages altogether, of which the first three can easily be introduced in the first year. The books contain picture dictionaries that explain nouns, adjectives and verbs with colourful illustrations. In this way full comprehension is guaranteed. The plots are simple and straightforward. Information is carefully controlled. Large illustrations also help understanding the text. Although the contents of the stories are rather juvenile, for about 7-8 year-olds, German students in the second half of their first year of English readily accepted the stories.

The series **Stepping into English** (Düsseldorf: Schwann and OUP) consists of six titles for the first two years. They contain six old fables by Aesop, brought up-to-date and illustrated. Each books comes with a list of words and easy exercises.

The **PMV Activity Readers**, published by Petersen-Macmillan Hamburg, consist of five titles which are all suitable for the first year of English. The plots are partly narrated, partly in dialogue. All titles are generously illustrated. The exercises are all fun to do and relate to the contents and new words. The five titles have been recorded on two audio cassettes which can be listened to either in class or at home in private reading.

Longman Structural Readers is a very comprehensive series in six stages altogether, the first of which can be introduced in the first year of English with fast students and in the second with slower learners. Pictures and texts come at a ratio of 2:1 so that full comprehension is guaranteed. Another feature is the careful control of vocabulary with frequent repetition of unknown words which also mostly appear in the illustrations. Most of the lower titles have accompanying audio cassettes.

The series **Favourite Fairy Tales**, Longman, comprises six titles with the fairy tales: The Princess and the Pea, Rapunzel, The Ugly Duckling, The Emperor's Clothes, Puss in Boots, and The Four Musicians. The titles contain a few exercises. The unique feature of this series is that they are available on two video cassettes, on which three tales are told respectively, not in animated cartoons but with drawings which are filmed so as to give the impression of movement. They can be introduced in the second year and prove to be highly entertaining especially since some of the children may have come across those fairy tales in their mother tongue as young children.

Oxford Graded Readers consist of four levels each with texts for junior and senior levels. The bottom level with about 500 headwords can be read in the second year.

Heinemann Guided Readers consist of four levels, starting at the Beginner Level with about 600 words. The overall aim is to offer a progressive series, in which vocabulary, structures and information are strictly controlled to suit the purposes of increasing reading ability. Some of the titles have been specially written

for the series; others are rewrites of existing well-known stories.

Collins English Library is a series of six stages altogether, the first of which starts with only 300 headwords.

Finally, there are **Rangers**, Macmillan, a comprehensive series of eight ranges. The first range can be introduced in the second year.

I must make it clear that this survey cannot be a complete one. It is a subjective list insofar as it is wholly based on my own practical experiences.

All the series mentioned so far have a few vital characteristics in common:

1) They start at a very simple language level and can be introduced so early that they can afford the students a feeling of successful learning from very early on.

2) They all come with large illustrations in colour. This is not only motivating, but contributes to a high degree of understanding of the text and the guessing of unknown words.

3) The plots are invariably simple and straightforward, however thrilling. Information is carefully controlled.

4) Some series come without vocabulary, others contain picture dictionaries and a few series come with bilingual lists.

5) Some series do not include any exercises, others contain exercises, often fun exercises, which mostly relate to the story or to new words.

6) Some titles are offered together with audio cassettes, one with video-cassettes.

7) The series are suitable for different levels of maturity and for a wide range of tastes.

4. Objectives

As I said at the beginning I proceed from the assumption that an early introduction of readers into the foreign language class is not only desirable but necessary and that a continuous process of reading is equally essential. And on the basis of this premise the following objectives can be and should be pursued:

1) The students can experience from very early on in their foreign language course that they can apply their knowledge of English without assistance from the teacher.

2) Growing independence can lead to increasing success, which is particularly important for weaker students who often suffer from lack of self-assurance and are easily discouraged.

3) Success normally results in increasing motivation so that students can remain motivated foreign language learners.

4) Growing experience in independent reading makes them more confident readers.

5) The experience that they can understand a text without actually knowing each single word makes them more tolerant towards unknown vocabulary as long as they grasp the gist of a story.

6) Growing experience also leads to the skill of intelligent guessing of unknown words. And this can be done mostly through illustrations. But the students can also deduce meaning form semantic or syntactic clues, from the context or the frequent repetitions of words or even from the similarity of an English word with one in the mother tongue.

7) Weaker students find out that their receptive skills grow in the course of time even if their productive skills remain limited.

8) Finally, more able students can, through a longer process of individual reading of increasingly complex texts, considerably enlarge their receptive vocabulary.

5. Experiments

For the past three and a half years I have conducted various experiments with readers in different types of school, mainly however at Hauptschul-level in the grades 5-7. These experiments started out uncoordinated because I had to depend on co-operative teachers, who were willing to sacrifice lessons or parts of lessons to activities which were unfamiliar to them and their classes, and I had to persuade a headmaster that I was not going to corrupt his students by giving them reading material detrimental to their minds. My main objective was to get the students to voluntarily read simple and motivating readers outside the classroom. I would like briefly to sketch what I did in the various grades.

As far as organization was concerned all the experiments had a few things in common: during the last period of school readers were lent to the students. They filled in a report card with their name, and when they handed the reader back one or two weeks later they ticked off if the reader had been too difficult, just about right or rather easy, and if they had found the reader very good, adequate or poor. There was no further control in order to fully establish the feeling of the voluntariness of the reading.

However, the teacher asked the students in individual informal

talks about their experiences, how they liked the texts and what they thought about the whole project. In all the classes the students responded favourably.

The first experiment was conducted in a sixth form (= second year of English) where the students were given books to read. Although they proved to be rather beyond their language level at the beginning the students demonstrated a surprising tenacity asking parents, brothers and sisters about unknown words. In order to overcome ensuing problems of pronunciation when they asked their relatives about vocabulary they got the accompanying cassettes to listen to while reading.

Two questionnaires were handed out and filled in within an interval of about four months of voluntary reading the main results of which were:

1) The students gladly accepted the possibility of individual independent reading and stated they felt more and more confident when reading alone.

2) Most students welcomed the opportunity of the accompanying cassette. Only a few complained that they did not get along well with reading and listening at the same time and consequently did one thing after the other.

3) They were all proud of the fact that they understood an unknown text without knowing every single word.

In a fifth form after about six months of learning English I introduced the series Start with English - Readers (grades 1-2) which proved to be an immediate success. As I said above the children (about 10-12 years old) did not in the least object to the juvenile plots, on the contrary, they enjoyed the obvious success in reading on their own. In this grade the teacher conducted a regular series of small conversations with the students asking them about individual texts, the contents, the difficulty and the contribution of the picture vocabulary towards comprehension.

In another sixth form a first reader was introduced in the second half of the school year as a reader in class. Here the main objective was to train students in inferring unknown words from illustrations, from the context or from the similarity to a German word. At the same time the students were given to understand that it was unnecessary for them to grasp the exact meaning of every single word in order to understand the story as a whole. This joint reading in class was meant to serve as preparation for the individual reading which was then introduced in the seventh grade.

In another seventh grade which had never before read anything in English apart from the course book, readers were introduced for mere pleasure and to enhance motivation, which seemed highly desirable, since quite a few students had already had a number of

setbacks and evinced first signs of frustration. The readers introduced had been particularly selected to be below the language level in order to guarantee immediate success. This, in fact, proved to be the case, for within a few months each student read at least six books, a lot of them more.

All this may sound highly encouraging. Yet a warning seems to be appropriate not to put expectations to high. Even if students eagerly borrow books they cannot necessarily be expected to show immediate success in their productive vocabulary. It will only be the receptive skills that are trained, and this does not immediately show in class. Given this, the success of voluntary reading cannot be measured objectively. However, what can be observed is a lasting interest in language learning, prolonged motivation and the readiness to borrow more books. This is the real evidence.

6. Controlling receptive reading

In this paper I am not so much concerned with the manifold ways of controlling individual reading, but rather with long-term use of readers over several years. However I will briefly touch upon a few possibilities to check students' reading.

1) Apart from filling in report cards which can give the teacher some information as to the popularity of some readers the students can be asked to report in class about the contents of the readers that have just returned, and they can recommend some books. This should be done in the mother tongue, to begin with, because reading a foreign text and understanding it is quite different from commenting on it in the foreign language.

2) If that is felt to take too much valuable lesson time the students can be asked to write short reports, either in their mother tongue or later in English, to be corrected by the teacher and to be pinned on a pin board for general information. On a wallchart the students note the books they have borrowed, together with brief comments as to how they liked it and what they liked best about it.

3) The students fill in a review sheet with information about place and time of action, number and names of persons and suchlike.

4) Instead of being asked questions by the teacher the students are asked to devise questions of their own. These are corrected by the teacher and handed out for the next pupil to answer, who borrows the book.

5) The students look up about ten important words they did not know when reading the book. Thus they develop a little list of words which is given to the next students who borrow the book.

6) The students think of a motivating exercise for their classmates, such as a crossword puzzle or some other fun exercise to

help comprehension of some of the unknown words of the text.
7) In the course of a long-term reading programme the teacher can develop a set of short exercises for each reader. This is handed out together with the book for the student to read and work on. Yet the students should have some opportunity to monitor themselves and accordingly be given a sheet with the solutions.

In the course of another little project in a fifth grade I developed yet another form of vocabulary control. Students each got a text of the Series Start with English - Readers and read it at home. On returning the book they were given the pictures and captions of the picture dictionary. I had photocopied them, carefully cut the pictures and captions and jumbled them. The students got a little bag of jumbled words and pictures and had to try and find the correct arrangement. With the longer books which contained about fifty words in the picture dictionary I had split them up into three or four bags which each contained no more than 15 words in order not to make the task too complicated. In the course of a few weeks the students developed the ability to connect words and pictures in a matter of few minutes. This only involved recognition but not the production of unknown words. I found out that in most cases the students were able to fulfil their tasks with no more than two or three errors, some only from lack of concentration. On the whole their receptive skills could be said to have increased noticeably.

7. Presentation of an integrated reading-programme

I have dwelt for some time on various possibilities of introducing readers into beginners' classes and of getting the students to read independently. My main objective, however, is a reading programme which is integrated into the foreign language class and, with intervals, is pursued for at least the first three years. To round my talk off, I would like to map out what I have in mind:

1) In the first year of foreign language learning students are given easy motivating readers for individual reading. The aim is here reading for gist only, giving the students confidence and the sense of early independence of their teacher. Reading is not formally controlled, yet the teacher tries in individual talks to elicit some response from the students.

2) In the second year students learn the most important basic techniques of working with a bilingual dictionary. On this basis a reader is introduced to be jointly read in class with the emphasis on training to guess the meaning of unknown words and to look them up only, if absolutely necessary.

Once they have managed a reader in class and have been trained in the most important techniques of guessing from context and developed strategies accordingly, they are asked to apply their knowledge by the individual reading of different books.

3) The beginning of the third year of foreign language learning should be the latest point for students to be reading independently outside the classroom. It is up to teachers if they ask students to do various tasks as described above or if they control the reading activities individually.

The long-term aim is reading for pleasure which, it is hoped, will enhance self-confidence and the ability to read independently, a skill which is of far-reaching value long after the ending of formal language learning at school.